

Reading Women's Protest In Manipur: A Different Voice?

Paromita Chakravarti

2012-04-02

This article revisits the Manipuri women's protest against the rape and killing of Thangjam Manorama Devi, a suspected Maoist insurgent, by the Indian Army in July 2004. The naked protest by the 'Mothers of Manorama' in front of the Indian Army headquarters, urging army men to come and rape them, represents a unique mode of non-violent protest. Its quiet aggression exposed the naked predatoriness of the Indian state against its own female citizens. By enacting the unnaturalness of violence on their bare bodies, they shocked the nation into realising the extraordinary conditions created in Manipur and elsewhere through the deployment of the army and the Armed Forces (Special Powers) Act of 1958, which grants them legal immunity. This article explores the significance of the Manipuri women's protest in the light of the history of both the colonial and the Indian state's exploitation of the region as well as the history of women's involvement in its social and economic development and peacebuilding activities.

Introduction

This article is written at a time when the Indian state is unleashing extreme violence against revolutionary *Maoist* groups who have been working with and mobilising tribal people in forested areas of various Indian states. Neglected by the Indian government, denied basic educational or health facilities, exploited by middlemen and moneylenders, their women raped by the police, the indigenous people have turned to the *Maoist* groups for protection and justice. Now, caught between repressive state violence and *Maoist* retaliation, they have become the greatest casualties of a war of attrition in which the fundamental issues of underdevelopment and deprivation

can no longer be raised.¹ As violence becomes routinised, a ‘state of exception’ in these areas gets naturalised as everyday reality.

In this milieu, the usual instruments of bringing a rogue state to book — invoking international law and conventions, conducting public trials of the government or getting human rights commissions to intervene — all seem not only absurdly inadequate in the face of mounting violence, but also impossible since there is no rule of law. It is imperative to de-legitimise this cycle of violence and counter-violence, but perhaps not through the usual legal means, which depend on the political will and the instruments of the state courts and human rights commissions. We need a non-violent but not passive language of protest, which can adequately expose the horrors of violence on both sides without resorting to the tired and futile clichés of demands for peace or ceasefire and which will capture the imagination of people and break their stupefied submission to violence that only serves to naturalise it.

It is in this context that this article revisits the women’s protest against the rape and killing of Manorama, a suspected *Maoist* insurgent, by the Indian Army in Manipur in July 2004. The naked protest by the ‘Mothers of Manorama’ in front of the Indian Army headquarters, urging army men to come and rape them, represents a unique mode of non-violent resistance. This protest was neither pacifist nor passive, but through its quiet aggression exposed the naked predatoriness of the Indian state against its own female citizens. The women ritualistically mirrored the state’s repression through mockery and subversion. By enacting the unnaturalness of violence on their ‘bare bodies’ they shocked the nation into realising the extraordinary conditions created in Manipur and elsewhere through the deployment of the army and the Armed Forces (Special Powers) Act 1958 (AFSPA), which grants the army legal immunity.

The ‘state of exception’ created by the government must be first recognised as such for ‘normalcy’ or peace to be imagined. The Manipuri women’s language of protest was successful precisely because it brought into the open, in all its embarrassing nakedness, the routine rapes committed by the army. As violence acquires an inevitability and regularity in the face-off between the state and the *Maoists*, and as the Indian media debate which violence is more justified and positions harden in civil society groups, a protest such as this seems to have important lessons for our troubled times. It also has significant implications for feminist engagement with the nation-state, the community and violence. The protest has focused attention on women’s modes of challenging the state and on how gender can become a focal

¹Source: Peace Research Institute, Oslo: <https://www.prio.org/>. Correlates of war and many political scientists define a civil war as at least 1,000 casualties per year.

point in larger social movements for peacebuilding and development. The Manipuri women's protest also has important implications for feminist activism about violence against women. The Manipuri women rejected the patriarchal construction of rape as dishonouring women and redefined the boundaries of the public and private, the personal and the political.

Manorama and Her Mothers: The AFSPA and the *Meira Paibis*

At 3.30 am on 11 July 2004 in Bamon Kampu, Imphal East District in the northeastern state of Manipur, three members of the Indian National Army stormed the house of 32-year-old Thangjam Manorama Devi. They beat her up along with her relatives and her elderly mother. Havildar Suresh Kumar, an army man, signed a memo stating that he was arresting Manorama for being 'a suspected insurgent, explosives expert and hard-core member' of the banned People's Liberation Army (PLA). The memo also stated that no incriminating evidence had been found in her house or on her person. The army men told the family that Manorama would be handed over to the Irilbung police in the morning. Less than three hours later, Manorama's lifeless body was discovered four kilometres from her house with torn clothes and bearing scratch marks all over, a wound on her thigh, probably inflicted by a knife, and bullet wounds on her back, upper buttock and vagina. One of her nipples had been plucked off (Human Rights Watch 2008:25–30).

A post-mortem examination was conducted. Manorama's family alleged that the police did not follow the Human Rights Commission's guidelines. Police did not hand the body over to the family and it was cremated as an unclaimed corpse even as her relatives mourned their inability to perform last rites. The Sector Assam Rifles, the paramilitary forces of the Indian Army that had arrested Manorama, declared her to be a People's Liberation Army member who had been shot dead while trying to flee from their custody.² Contradicting the earlier memo that had asserted that no incriminating evidence had been found in her house or on her person, a spokesperson for the army claimed that Manorama had a hand grenade and a wireless set (Sapam).

Following these events, public protests erupted through Manipur. Students' and women's organisations called a general strike. The day the 72-hour strike ended, the government imposed a curfew. People defied the curfew, fighting pitched battles on the streets with the Manipur police, Indian Reserve Battalion and the Central Reserve

²'Human Rights Problems Persist, Says UN Report' in UN News Service, 22 March 2007.

Police Force. A large number of women staged demonstrations and sit-ins. The most spectacular protest was staged by a group of middle-aged women of *Meira Paibi*, a leading women's organisation in Manipur whose name means the 'torch-bearers'. They stormed the western gate of the Kangla Fort, the headquarters of the Assam Rifles stationed at Manipur and a symbol of state power.

In an unprecedented move, the women took off their clothes. Facing the fort gates, they shouted challenges to the Indian army. They carried a banner reading 'Indian Army rape us, Indian Army take our flesh'. Over 50 women from different women's organisations in Manipur supported the protest. As the 12 naked women marched towards the Kangla gate, they shouted: 'You dogs of Assam Rifles! Come rape us like you raped Manorama!' They screamed, 'We are mothers of Manorama. Come satisfy your lust. Play on our bodies. Eat our flesh. Come, Indian Army' (Sapam; Human Rights Watch 2008:30–32). The women also demanded the withdrawal of the AFSPA, which has been in operation in Manipur since 1980. The Act empowers the army to assume 'special' powers over civilian lives in the name of controlling insurgency in a 'disturbed area'. The Act is also in operation in the state of Jammu and Kashmir. The context and implications of the Act will be discussed in greater detail in a later section.

The Manipuri women's protest continued for over 45 minutes. The police were too shocked to act. Many of the women fainted. Passers-by stopped their cars and took them to hospital. Many stood spellbound, watching these elderly women, many of them mothers, with long untied hair, their naked bodies commanding not embarrassment but a hushed awe. These women had found a language of protest that had disturbed both the complacent Indian Army, accustomed to complete impunity for its actions, and a jaded citizenry numbed by regular army excesses. Although the Manipur government declared a news blackout, the images of 'Manorama's Mothers' made their way into all national dailies the next morning. They were greeted with stunned silence. Although women's groups all over India expressed solidarity with the *Meira Paibis*, they seemed to lack the critical apparatus to understand the singular simplicity, power and directness of this naked protest. This unique agitation needs to be understood against the larger history of Manipur, of the AFSPA and the tradition of women's relationship to the polity and community in Manipur.

Violence against Women and the Limits of Legal Activism

The refusal of the *Meira Paibis* to seek legal recourse and their indictment of the state, the dispenser of justice, makes this a singular protest. Within what has been called the 'autonomous women's movement' in India (Sen 2004; Butalia 2005:326)³, feminist activism against violence against women has focused perhaps excessively on the law and on legal reforms and suing the state for justice (Butalia 2005:338). In its early phases, the movement had not actively questioned the utility of abstract constitutional guarantees in a nation founded on the exclusion of the 'bare lives' of women. Those from marginalised castes, minority communities, tribals or those from the 'insurgent' states of the North East or Jammu and Kashmir are particularly vulnerable.⁴ Indian feminist Mary E. John comments:

The state may ... respond — at times with alacrity — to the claims made upon it by the women's movement, whose spokespersons are invariably middle class and upper caste, and who are also familiar with its structures. The story is quite different when it comes to implementing policies or laws in favour of women of a different class and caste, especially when it involves opposing those with whom the state identifies (1996:3075).

Although the autonomous women's movement may have become much more critical of the state now, it has been diffident in taking on the patriarchal nation, particularly in comparison with other South Asian post-colonial states (Chakravarti 2009:49). The Indian women's movement emerged from within the nationalist struggle for independence and the idea of the nation remained entrenched in it for a long time.⁵ Despite women's involvement in movements in post-independence India, which criticised the bourgeois state (peasant and trade union movements, the revolutionary *Naxalite* movement of the 1960s and '70s), and in civil rights movements against the Indian government's declaration of an emergency in 1975, the serious feminist challenges to the Indian nation have emerged fairly recently (Chakravarti 2009:61). Much of this challenge arose from a gendered analysis of the

³<http://webapps01.un.org/vawdatabase/home.action>, accessed 24 June 2010.

⁴'Liberian Men and Women Unite to Fight Rape' 21 June 2006: www.unfpa.org/news/news.cfm?ID=811.

⁵'Government, Women's Groups Decry Post-war Sexual Violence,' UN Integrated Regional Information Networks, 15 January 2007.

'Human Rights Problems Persist, Says UN Report', UN News Service, 22 March 2007.

'Survey on Rape Inheritance Laws Concluded' in *The Analyst*, Liberia, 29 December 2006.

Partition of India, an event during which nationalism was used to incite and justify large-scale atrocities on women in both India and the new state of Pakistan (Menon & Bhasin 1998; Butalia 2000; Bagchi & Dasgupta 2003). The Gujarat genocide of 2002 confirmed these critiques, and the horrors of the Partition were revisited when widespread rapes and burning of Muslim women (and killings of men) were committed in the name of a Hindu nation as the police watched (*Sarkar* 2002; Nussbaum 2004; Baxi 2005).

Following Gujarat, Indian feminists have become more vigilant about India's growing militarism, particularly along its borders. The 11th national conference of the Indian Association for Women's Studies had sessions on militarisation and conflict-induced displacement, and it passed a resolution against the AFSPA (Chakravarti 2009:69). Research is emerging on Kashmiri women (Butalia 2002; Chenoy 2002; Hans 2003),⁶ but comparatively less feminist scholarship exists on women of the North East, despite their powerful organisation and their important political and social roles.

Although violence against women has been an abiding concern, Indian feminists have not engaged actively enough with the systematic terrorisation of women by both the Indian Army and militant groups in the so called 'disturbed' states of the Indian nation. It is only recently that the Manorama incident has been seen as a landmark event in the history of Indian feminist resistance against violence against women. In Kannabiran and Menon (2007), this 25-year-old struggle has been seen as being bracketed by the two watershed cases of Mathura and Manorama. While the Mathura case, involving the custodial rape of a young *dalit* woman, inaugurated Indian feminists' legal activism against rape laws in the 1970s, the Manorama case marks perhaps the futility of seeking legal redress when the state itself is an aggressor. However, even their study does not unpack fully the naked protest and its implications.

The *Meira Paibis*' unusual protest compelled Indian feminists to re-evaluate their own language of activism and the terms of their engagement with a patriarchal, military state and their complicity in the ideology of the nation. Refusing to invoke the liberal feminist models that have come to define some aspects of the women's movement, particularly its attenuated, NGO-influenced versions, the 'Mothers of Manorama' have spoken in a genuinely 'different voice' (Gilligan 1982). They have not only assaulted the nation, but have also challenged the accepted modes of doing so through international law or human rights frameworks.

By using a form of protest that is rooted in local movements, rituals and experi-

⁶'SADC Protocol on Gender and Development, 2006': www.sadc.int/index/browse/page/465.

ences, they opened up the possibility of going beyond these global paradigms, which fall back on the structures of law and the state for delivery. These international instruments also leave unchallenged, or even support, larger systemic inequities like the uneven flow of global capital, the violence of unequal development and the need for political change. The *Meira Paibis* are committed to a model of community development that is just and based on gender equity, albeit within certain limitations. Their movements thus can sustain a longer and more meaningful peace that is linked to justice rather than a mere cessation of violence. To do this, they must reject a repressive state, but also take the Indian government to task for not fulfilling its duties to its citizens, particularly in light of the changing role of the neoliberal state.

Genealogies of Violence: Underdevelopment, the ‘Underground’ and the Manipuri Women’s Movement

Repression and retaliation in Manipur go back much further than the AFSPA. Situated on India’s northeastern border with Myanmar, Manipur was one of the last states to be incorporated into India. An independent princely state, it came under *de facto* British rule in 1891 and was controlled by their political agent while the king remained a titular head (Dena 1984; Parratt & Parratt 1992). After Indian independence in 1947, Manipur re-emerged as an independent state and remained so until it was incorporated into India in 1949.

Throughout Manipur’s history, women remained at the forefront of political movements. Although part of a traditional patriarchal society and subject to the dowry system, domestic violence, a lack of property rights and limited access to political offices, the women of Manipur have been remarkably active. They have worked outside the home and controlled the markets and food supplies (Chaki-Sircar 1984:38; Bimola 1988:168). Manipur’s history is marked by the two great ‘women’s wars’, or *nupilals* — one in 1904 and one in 1939 (Parratt & Parratt 2001). These two women’s uprisings, triggered by economic and social causes, gathered strength and launched a movement which eventually overthrew the British regime and the local monarchy, introducing a brief period of democracy in Manipur (Parratt & Parratt 2001). However, soon after independence the Indian state replaced the elected government, forcing the king to sign a ‘merger agreement’. India incorporated Manipur into the Indian polity as a Union Territory. Following this, women came out on to the streets again demanding statehood,⁷ which was granted in 1972. Although this

⁷‘Final Declaration’, All-party Burundi Women’s Peace Conference, 17–20 July 2000, Arusha.

meant greater political autonomy, the old problems of underdevelopment continued, as did the Indian government's repressive presence through the AFSPA.

Locating Manipur: memories of underdevelopment

Located in the strategically important northeast frontier of India (sharing borders with Myanmar and China) and containing important trade routes to Southeast Asia, the Manipur region has always been the focus of military and commercial interests. Indian and British traders from other states destroyed the local, mainly tribal economy of this region by establishing timber, rubber and tea plantations, which depleted forest resources and displaced indigenous populations.

Even after attaining statehood, there was little development in Manipur. There has been a steady de-industrialisation of the North East. From being an exporter of rice and other products in the 1930s and '40s, Manipur has become an importer, providing merely a market for other Indian states. The little developmental work undertaken by the government has not reached the poor. Problems of unequal development between the forested hills and the more accessible valley areas have exacerbated ethnic rivalries and compounded the situation.⁸

This region has been part of the opium trade route. It remains one of the corridors of international drug trafficking. Manipur has very high rates of intravenous drug use and concomitantly, HIV and AIDS. With China's emergence as a military and economic superpower, India has increased its military presence in the North East with intensified levels of army repression. Consequently resentment against the Indian government and its army has found expression in an underground movement of insurgent groups some of whom are inspired by the *Maoist* ideology of overthrowing a repressive state machinery (Singh, T. 2008; Ahmad & Biswas 2004; Mohapatra 2002; Singh, C. 2005)

Fighting insurgency: the AFSPA and state violence

The Indian government first enacted the AFSPA in 1958 to deal with rebellions in Manipur and the neighbouring state of Assam. The draconian AFSPA provisions grant unrestricted powers to army personnel and complete legal immunity. Members of the army, down to the rank of a non-commissioned officer, may shoot to kill and search and arrest without warrant any person on mere suspicion of insurgency. To institute legal proceedings against injustices perpetrated under the AFSPA, a

⁸'Final Declaration', All-party Burundi Women's Peace Conference, 17–20 July 2000, Arusha.

citizen must seek prior sanction from the central government. This makes it nearly impossible to redress fundamental rights violations under AFSPA.

In 1972, the AFSPA was extended to cover all of the North East. This Act is intended specifically to be used in 'disturbed areas', though no precise definition of what constitutes 'disturbance' is given. From 1980 large parts of Manipur characterised as 'insurgent' areas have been put under this Act. No review of the Act has taken place, despite people's protests. Thirteen battalions of the Assam Rifles, a paramilitary force of the Ministry of Home Affairs, four of the Indian Army, eight of the Central Reserve Police Force as well as local security forces have been deployed continuously in the state. Several armed rebel groups operate in Manipur today. The *Maoist* Manipur People's Liberation Army (PLA), formed in the 1970s, is the most prominent. Manorama was allegedly a PLA activist. The AFSPA has authorised the army to conduct body searches, storm homes at night and seize goods and hold families of suspected militants hostage. The army engages in rampant sexual violence in the name of counter-insurgency — gang rapes, assaults on pregnant women, rubbing chilli powder into women's genitals, stripping and flogging and child abuse. Women from insurgents' families have been specially vulnerable. They are tortured to extract information, raped and beaten and made victims of an 'exemplary' punishment (Banerjee 2008a; Khala 2003).

Neoliberal economy and new polity: violence, development and the wages of peace

The violence unleashed against women is intimately connected to the contemporary development policies of the Indian state. Following the liberalisation and globalisation of the economy, the Indian state is withdrawing from public sector spending. Abdicating its developmental responsibilities it is emerging as a broker for multinational corporations, securing them cheap land, offering business concessions and setting up low-tax Special Economic Zones. This is leading to forced land acquisition by the state, widespread displacement of indigenous people and destruction of their livelihoods, particularly in the forested tribal belts of India. The Indian government has announced a new development policy for the North East in the Draft Vision 2020, being touted as India's 'Look East' policy (Hanbajam 2006). This is a corporate capital-driven developmental model whose beneficiaries are unlikely to be the local people or the poor.⁹ As the state moves from its 'welfare' and developmental role, it intensifies its repressive powers through the law and army to protect the interests

⁹'Human Rights Problems Persist, Says UN Report,' UN News Service, 22 March 2007.

of the global market. In these circumstances it is unlikely that the AFSPA will be removed. It might even be strengthened to protect the needs of the new neoliberal economy. This inaugurates a new stage in the discourse of the state, the nation and of multinational commerce. There is a new legitimisation of state violence in the name of development and progress that gathers strength from the rhetoric deployed in the U.S. invasion of Iraq, justifying violence as a legitimate means of ensuring democracy, even peace and development. Women's bodies become again one of the arenas on which this development agenda and violence play out. It is in this larger context that Manorama's killing and the *Meira Paibis*' protest should be read.

The naked protest: challenging feminist frameworks

The *Meira Paibis* are the most prominent women's group in Manipur who bear the historical legacy of Manipuri women's activism from colonial times. Their movement took off in the 1980s with the hugely successful *Nasha Bandhi* movement against the alcoholism, drug abuse and rowdyism of Manipuri men. They gathered a lot of popular support, including that of the PLA. The women's efforts led to Manipur being declared an alcohol-free state by law in 1991. Since that time, the *Meira Paibis* have agitated against a range of social problems. However, their activities have gradually become more focused on the militarisation of the state and the demand for the withdrawal of the AFSPA. The women of Manipur have taken up cases of army brutality against women in law courts and with the Human Rights Commission. They have negotiated with the army and have mediated between civil society and militant groups (Banerjee 2008a). They have supported Irom Sharmila, known as the 'Iron Lady of Manipur', a civil rights activist and poet who has protested the AFSPA through a hunger strike since 2000 (Mehrota 2009).

Yet none of the *Meira Paibis*' activities, steadfastly carried on for over 30 years, could have prepared anybody for their naked protest. It represented in many ways a climactic moment in the women's movements in Manipur and India in its unique and unabashed language of collective resistance and in its unapologetic attack on the Indian nation-state whose only presence in Manipur is visible neither through development nor governance but only through its repressive army. The Indian dailies covered the *Meira Paibis*' protest in 2004. But there was little discussion about this new language of protest by the media, intellectuals or even women's groups. They were perhaps unable to engage with the semiotics of this unusual act and unpack its implications fully. This failure is also perhaps indicative of the differences between the *Meira Paibis*' movement and the feminist activism of the women's groups within the 'autonomous' women's movement.

Despite their success, one of the critiques of the women's movements in the North East, like the *Meira Paibis* and the Naga Mothers' Association, is that they are not 'feminist'. Embedded in traditional, patriarchal communities, they do not challenge their norms, ignoring issues of dowry, polygamy and domestic violence within their homes and local political formations (Mahanta 2001; Brara 2002). They are often not focused on women's issues, choosing instead to engage in social and community work. Brara describes them as 'an organisation by women but not necessarily for women' (2002:195). Groups like the Naga Mothers' Association have been criticised for their unproblematised glorification of motherhood (Das 2008). The 'politics of motherhood' is ambivalent since it is available both for 'the mobilisation for human rights in peace' as well as 'for raising soldiers' (Manchanda 2005:25).

Women's movements in the North East are also accused of not being focused on gender oppression across the army/militant divide and being too caught up in ethnic identities. However, they are also blamed for negotiating both with the army and the insurgents and being manipulated by both (Takhellambum 2003). Yet it is some of these very qualities, considered ambiguous in a feminist context, that were responsible for the power and effectiveness of the *Meira Paibis*' protest. According to some reports, the protest commanded awe because it deployed a traditional, sacral, ritual language.¹⁰ As 'Mothers of Manorama', the *Meira Paibis* deployed the trope of motherhood to shock and shame the army, whom they rendered as disobedient and wayward sons. By simultaneously insisting on their maternal status and inviting rape, they made the very act of viewing their naked bodies fraught with the horror of primeval taboo and oedipal guilt. By doing so they turned the shame of rape back on Manorama's rapists (Das 2008).

That the protesters could put their exposed bodies in a public space, under male scrutiny, without incurring the risk of physical or social harm is a testimony to the respect and support that the *Meira Paibis* command in their community through their sustained work in development, peace and justice. Women's relationships to communities, particularly traditional or religious ones, have been a thorny issue in the autonomous women's movement in India, particularly in the context of the movements campaigning for a Uniform Civil Code (Rajan 2003b). Community norms, particularly those of traditional communities, are often seen as inhibiting women's empowerment. Yet it is precisely because of their position in the community as female elders who command respect through their historical social and economic roles that the *Meira Paibis* could use a language of protest in which they could present

¹⁰ See Peace Research Institute, Oslo, at <https://www.prio.org/>; Uppsala Conflict Data Project at www.sipri.org/research/conflict/publications/; and Mueller 2009.

Manorama's rape as the collective rape not just of Manipur's women but also of its people.

It is because the *Meira Paibis* carry the voice of their community that women's rape could be seen as a focal issue in the social and political struggle for the repeal of the AFSPA. Paula Banerjee has argued that it is their commitment to peace and community development and their ability to situate their politics within traditional roles that has allowed the *Meira Paibis* to carve a space within the public sphere and to fight against sexual and gender exploitation. However problematic this might appear in feminist terms, it is perhaps a pragmatic mode adopted by the *Meira Paibis* to ensure their moral and political right to represent and lead their communities and to ensure sustained peace and justice (Banerjee 2008b:214–16).

Bodies, Sexuality and Rape: Changing the Terms of Discursive Engagement

The naked protest seemed to challenge the analytical frameworks of understanding women's political demonstrations because of its radical deployment of bare female bodies in a public space as well as its bold redefinition of the discursive construction of rape and of the realms of the public and the private. While Indian feminists and leftist intellectuals have long criticised the capitalist media's exploitation of female nudity, they have not elaborated a vocabulary which could be used to describe the *Meira Paibis*' extraordinary nakedness. These were bodies that were not sexually inviting nor offering themselves for the male gaze. Rather, they sought to deconstruct the very politics of objectification on which the codes of the presentation and representation of the female body is premised.

The middle-aged protestors' nakedness with warts, dimpled flesh and sagging breasts was a contrast to the cosmetically engineered female nudity that we are more accustomed to seeing in the media. Paradoxically, by aggressively inviting the Indian Army to 'eat their flesh', they had actually placed their bodies outside the realm of exploitation — whether through watching, possessing or raping. By insisting on their maternal status, they had also made it impossible to view their bodies with lust without incurring oedipal guilt.

Some commentators have remarked that naked protests in general seek to embody a politics of personal spiritualism (Souweine 2005). Yet in the *Meira Paibis*' act, there was an unmistakable deployment of the materiality of the body. They used the female body to rebuke the Indian army and subvert the patriarchal ideology of rape as a tool for dishonouring women. Instead, they exposed and dishonoured

the perpetrators of rape. Through their vociferous challenge, the women refused to be shamed, threatened and silenced by rape, which is used as a regular strategy to oppress a people.

Aparna Mahanta points out that although rape is a rare phenomenon within tribal societies bound by kinship ties, it has been pervasively used as an instrument of subjugation in conflict in the North East, particularly by the Indian Army. So much so that rape is no longer treated, as it still is in large parts of India, as 'personal', a matter of individual or family honour, it has become instead a 'public', political issue' (Mahanta 2001:360). The *Meira Paibis* stridently publicised what could be dismissed as a private issue, the rape of Manorama. They used as their individual bodies, the most personal of all things, as a political instrument which assumed a spectacular and collective form, personalising the political and politicising the personal. This was a radical redefinition of the boundaries of the private and public spheres, a division maintained to subjugate women. The *Meira Paibis* refused to treat rape as an individual's crime or the victim's 'problem' which may be legally addressed. Manorama's rape became, what it always was, an act of state terror that needs political redress.

Conclusion: Women's Bodies, Nation and State

The *Meira Paibis*' protest assaulted the nation and its ideology. The women did not merely take the state to task for failing in its commitments, but actually challenged the *Indian* army, which is synonymous with the nation. By exposing the nation's defenders as perpetrators of crimes on its own women they questioned the basis of ideas of citizenship, democracy and the role of the nation-state. The *Meira Paibis*' naked protest did not seek justice or legal redress.^[^/10] As Manipuris and as women, they knew that suing the Indian nation-state for rights of life and liberty would be futile in a context where the state is clearly the aggressor. Such an act might become a means of reconfirming the power the state already has over their bodies.

The naked women chose to enact the spectacle of what Agamben has called 'bare life' (Agamben 1998), which lies outside the law. The AFSPA has created a continuous 'state of exception' in the region. Manipuri people, particularly women, have been reduced to a mere biological existence without political life — they have been de-nationalised, arbitrarily characterised as 'insurgents', denied basic citizenship rights and raped and killed with impunity. By enacting and literalising the condition of bare life on their naked bodies, the *Meira Paibis* forced the state to gaze upon the consequences of its actions on its own citizens, to recognise the farce of its liberal

democracy.

The shock value of the naked protest exposed the extraordinariness of the 'state of exception' in Manipur when mothers had to offer their bare bodies to satisfy the army's lust. This de-normalisation and de-familiarisation of violence, by wrenching it away from everyday frames of reference that make it acceptable, are crucial to women's resistance against violence as it is for all struggles against fascism. As Benjamin writes:

The tradition of the oppressed teaches us that the 'state of emergency' in which we live is not the exception but the rule. We must attain to a conception of history that is in keeping with this insight. Then we shall clearly realise that it is our task to bring about a real state of emergency, and this will improve our position in the struggle against fascism (2007: 257).

The *Meira Paibis* managed by their protest to create this state of emergency, to force its onlookers to recognise the state of exception for what it was.

For the purposes of this article, I use the idea of the nation-state as a compounded entity, but perhaps the two need to be thought of as distinct for post-liberalisation feminist politics (Menon 2004:228). While women must reject the majoritarian ideology of the nation that is used to justify the repressive acts of the state on its citizens, they must also ensure that the state fulfils its developmental commitments towards them. As the worst victims of aggressive nationalism and unchecked globalisation, women must challenge the neoliberal state's attempts to use the rhetoric of national development to protect its lucrative deals with multinationals. They should also question the top-down developmental paradigm and work towards a more equitable and just model that ensures the participation of the community.

In this context, the *Meira Paibis*, traditional custodians of local markets, vigilant keepers of peace and conscientious objectors to injustice, have to play a critical role. On the one hand, they must insist, as the liberal left and women's groups do, on a greater role for the state in ensuring democratic development since women and marginalised populations are worst affected by processes of unregulated globalisation. On the other hand, they have to ensure that this enhanced role of the state does not translate into greater repression. So they must also resist the repressive ideology of the nation which will be used more and more to strengthen the neoliberal state in its efforts at protecting the interests of private profit and global capital. As a responsible women's group, they will have to ask the question that was asked by people of the 'Maoistinfested' tribal belt:

when the government says that the 'Writ of the State must run' seems to only mean that police stations must be put in place. Not schools or clinics or housing or clean wa-

ter, or a fair price for forest produce, or even freedom from the fear of police ... They asked why the 'Writ of the State' could never be taken to mean justice (Roy 2009).

It is by asking uncomfortable questions and speaking in a different voice that the Meira Paibis will retain their unique position as a group that looks after the difficult business of everyday survival in the midst of violence but also disrupts the state's attempts to make violence a quotidian phenomenon. It is their quest for justice in the economic, political and social spheres, rooted firmly in the daily concerns of the community, that can ensure a sustainable peace that is much more than a ceasefire or a lifting of the AFSPA.

The *Meira Paibis*' demonstration marked not only a new mode of women's resistance which redefined rape and rewrote the semiotics of nude, female body but also pointed towards a new mode of resisting the cycles of violence within which Manipur has been caught up for decades. By deploying the trope of motherhood they underlined the kinship ties which bind the community. This enabled them to carry its voice and convey its collective outrage. Their protest thus went beyond Manorama's rape and raised questions of the militarisation of the state and the need for justice. It also underlined the primary and predominant need to address issues of violence against women in envisaging any form of peace or reconciliation.

By eschewing the usual demands for legal redress, they refused to sue a state which was antagonistic to its citizens. Instead, they deployed a new political language of mockery and subversion which undermined the rhetoric of a protective nation or a welfarist state. By inviting the army to rape them, the women exposed the state's most predatory face which is becoming increasingly manifest as it moves towards a neoliberal economy and the unchecked reign of the global market. By using the intimate and personal language of their bare bodies rather than the impersonal discourse of justice and law, the *Meira Paibis* compelled the army, and by extension the Indian state to gaze upon the human consequences of its violence. By confronting them directly as men, not merely as agents of the State, and offering their vulnerable female bodies to them, the Mothers of Manorama forced army men to recognise a fundamental shared corporeal humanity with them, which had been violated through Manorama's rape, beyond questions of insurgency and national sovereignty. By reducing themselves to mere flesh to be preyed upon, they were mocking the state's systematic dehumanisation and objectification of its citizens' bodies. The women did not just plead for a removal of AFSPA. They demanded that the state recognize their humanity. Only such recognition can form the basis for a non-antagonistic relationship between citizen and state, enable peace talks on equitable terms and sustainable and democratic development. In this context, de-

velopment would serve the interests of the community rather than the agenda of the global market brokered by a muscle-flexing neoliberal Indian state.

References

- Agamben, G. 1998, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, Stanford: Stanford University Press.
- Ahmad R. & Biswas, P. 2004, *Political Underdevelopment of Northeast India*, New Delhi: Akansha Publishing House.
- Bagchi, J. & Dasgupta, S. 2003 eds, *The Trauma and the Triumph: Gender and Partition in Eastern India*, Kolkata: Stree.
- Banerjee, P. 2008a, 'Communities, Gender and the Border: A legal Narrative on India's North East' in Kannabiran, K. & Singh, R. eds, *Challenging the Rule(s) of Law: Colonialism, Criminology and Human Rights in India*, New Delhi: Sage:257–80; 2008b, 'The Space Between: Women's Negotiations with Democracy' in Banerjee, P. ed., *Women in Peace Politics*, New Delhi: Sage:201–217.
- Baxi, U. 2005, 'The Gujarat Catastrophe: Notes on Reading Politics as Democidal Rape Culture' in Kannabiran, K. ed., *The Violence of Normal Times: Essays on Women's Lived Realities*, New Delhi: Women Unlimited:332–384.
- Bimola, K. 1988, 'Manipuri Women: A Study' in Sanajaoba, N. ed., *Manipur: Past and Present 1*, Delhi: Mittal Publications.
- Brara, V. 2002, 'Breaking the Myth: The Social Status of Meitei Women' in Fernandes, W. & Barbara, S. eds., *Changing Women's Status in India: Focus on the North East*, Guwahati: North Eastern Social Research Centre.
- Butalia, U. 2000, *The Other Side of Silence: Voices from the Partition of India*, Durham: Duke University Press; 2002, *Speaking Peace: Women's Voices from Kashmir*, New Delhi: Kali for Women; 2005, 'Confrontation and Negotiation: The Women's Movements' Responses to Violence against Women' in Khullar, M. ed., *Writing the Women's Movement: A Reader*, New Delhi: Zubaan:325–355.

- Chaki-Sircar, M. 1984, *Feminism in a Traditional Society*, New Delhi: Shakti Books.
- Chakravarti, U. 2009, 'Archiving Disquiet: Feminist Praxis and the Nation State' in Kumar Singh, U, ed., *Human Rights and Peace: Ideas, Laws, Institutions and Movements*, New Delhi: Sage:49–74.
- Chenoy, A. 2003, *Militarism and Women in South Asia*, New Delhi: Kali for Women.
- Das, S. 2008, 'Ethnicity and Democracy Meet when Mothers Protest' in Banerjee, P. ed., *Women in Peace Politics*, New Delhi: Sage:54–77.
- Dena, L. 1984, *British Policy towards Manipur, 1891–1919*, Imphal: published by the author.
- Forbes, G. 1998, *Women in Modern India*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Gilligan, C. 1993, *In a Different Voice*, Boston: Harvard University Press.
- Hanjabam, I. 2006, 'India's Look East Policy and Manipur's Economy: A Critical Scrutiny' in *Alternative Perspectives* 1:iv.
- Hans, A. 2003, 'Refugee Women and Children in India' in Samaddar R. ed., *Refugees and the State: Practices of Asylum and Care in India, 1947–2000*, New Delhi: Sage.
- Human Rights Watch 2008, *These Fellows Must Be Eliminated: Relentless Violence and Impunity in Manipur*, New York: Human Rights Watch.
- John, M. 1996, 'Gender and Development in India, 1970–1990s; Some Reflections on the Constitutive Role of Contexts' in *Economic and Political Weekly* 31:47:3071–3077.
- Kannabiran, K. & Menon, R. 2007 eds, *From Mathura to Manorama; Resisting Violence Against Women in India*, New Delhi: Women Unlimited.
- Khala, K. 2003, *The Armed Forces (Special Powers) Act and its Impact on Women in Nagaland*, WISCOMP Perspectives 5, New Delhi: WISCOMP.
- Mahanta, A. 2001, 'Patriarchy and State Systems in North East India: A Historical and Critical Perspective' in Sangari, K. & Chakravarti, U. eds, *From Myths to Markets:*

Essays on Gender, Indian Institute of Advanced Studies, Shimla: Manohar:341–367

Manchanda, R. 2004, *We Do More Because We Can: Naga Women in the Peace Process*, Kathmandu: South Asia Forum for Human Rights.

Mehrotra, D. 2009, *Burning Bright: Irom Sharmila and the Struggle for Peace in Manipur*, New Delhi: Penguin.

Menon, N. 2004, *Recovering Subversion: Feminist Politics Beyond the Law*, New Delhi: Permanent Black

Menon, R. & Bhasin, K. 1998 eds, *Borders and Boundaries: Women in India's Partition*, Delhi: Kali for Women.

Mohapatra, A. 2002, 'Development and Underdevelopment in the Northeast Region: Search for a Paradigm' in Deb, B. ed., *Development Priorities in North East India*, New Delhi: Concept Publications.

Nag, A. 2006, 'Land, Migrants, Hegemony: The Politics of Demography in Northeast India' in Syiemlieh, D., Dutta, A. & Baruah, S. eds *Challenges of Development in North-East India*, New Delhi: Regency New Delhi.

Nussbaum, M. 2004, 'Body of the Nation' in *Boston Review*, Summer.

Parratt, J. & Parratt, S. 1992, *Queen Empress vs Prince of Tikendrajit: The Anglo-Manipuri Conflict of 1891*, New Delhi: Har-Anand Publications; 2001, 'The Second "Women's War" and the Emergence of Democratic Government in Manipur' in *Modern Asian Studies* 35:4: 905–919.

Rajan, R. 2003, *The Scandal of the State: Women, Law, and Citizenship in Post-colonial India*, New Delhi: Permanent Black.

Roy, A. 2009, 'The Heart of India Is under Attack' in *The Guardian*, 30 September: <https://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/2009/oct/30/mining-india-maoists-green-hunt>, accessed 21 May 2010.

Sapam, A. (no date), 'Manorama's Family: Waiting Forever' in *KanglaOnline*: www.kanglaonline.com/index.php?template=kshow&kid.=1086, accessed 21 May 2010.

Sarkar, T. 2002, 'Semiotics of Terror: Muslim Children and Women in Hindu Rashtra' in *Economic and Political Weekly*, July 13:2872–2876.

Sen, I. 2004, 'Women's Politics in India' in Chaudhuri, M. ed., *Feminism in India*, New Delhi: Women Unlimited:187–210.

Singh, C. 2005, 'Manipur's Economy: Historical Roots and Structural Evolution' in *Eastern Quarterly* 3:iii.

Singh, T. 2008, 'Understanding Underdevelopment: The State of Economy in the North East' in *Eastern Quarterly* 4:iii & iv, October 2007-March 2008: www.manipurresearchforum.org/current.html

Souweine, I. 2005, 'Naked Protest and the Politics of Personalism' in Narula, M. ed., *Bare Acts*, Sarai Reader 5, Delhi: Sarai Programme:526–536.

Sutton, B. 2007, 'Naked Protest: Memories of Bodies and Resistance at the World Social Forum' in *Journal of International Women's Studies* 8:3:139–48.

Takhellambum, B. 2003, *Women's Uprising in Manipur: A Legacy Continued*, New Delhi: Women in Security, Conflict Management and Peace.

Walter, B. 2007, 'Theses on the Philosophy of History VIII' in Arendt, H. ed., *Illuminations: Essays and Reflections*, New York: Schocken Books.

Wangkheirakpam, R. 2008, 'The Role of International Finance in North East India: Fuelling a New Colonization' in *Eastern Quarterly* 4:iii & iv, October 2007-March 2008; *available at* www.manipurresearchforum.org/RoleInternationalFinanceNEIndia.htm